**From Birth to Battlefield: War and the Victimized in *Slaughterhouse Five***

War and violence are inseparable. War is an act of immeasurable violence that is rationalized in the name of a human goal, whatever that goal may be. The goal may differ by family, it may differ by political ideology, or it may differ based upon the luck that determined what spot of land in this vast world you would be born upon, but one thing remains the same regardless of circumstance; those who initiate war claim that their goal is the one worth dying for. Kurt Vonnegut points out the absurdity of this claim in his novel *Slaughterhouse Five*. In order to rationalize war one must be able to rationalize violence and in order to rationalize violence one must find reason in the suffering of its victims; to rationalize war is to attempt to make sense of the absurd. For many people, a “successful war” is deemed a victory in battle coupled with a lower body count than your enemy, implying that the significance of death is dictated in part by the location of your birth. Like Vonnegut, I do not consider myself “anti-war” any more than I consider myself “anti-glacier”. I know that my time is better spent elsewhere rather than asking for an end to all war. But also like Vonnegut I realize that the cost of war extends far beyond the graves of those who die in it. It is the living who are lastingly affected by war, for they must live in a world that would attempt to justify it. *Slaughterhouse Five* shows us what it means to be a victim of war, a victim of senseless violence, in the hopes that we as living people will stop trying to justify absurdity and instead realize that those who live on in the shadow of war are victims as well.

**Drafting the Cultural Blueprint: Differences in American and Japanese Education**

Educational institutions form the backbone of culture around the world. The process of the “teacher” passing knowledge on to the “student” occurs in all societies, whether that teacher takes the form of a traditional North American school teacher or the elder of a tribal community. As schooling begins in the most formative years of a child’s life, the educational process is a significant force in a child’s development as a functioning member of his or her society. Much of the educational process is dictated by the cultural standards that are transmitted either through the selection of standards and curricula or the methods through which the teacher presents information to the student; thus, by investigating the skills that are deemed important by the educational system and taught in the school environment, one can learn a great deal about the values and concerns of a culture. Investigation of the Japanese school system in particular yields insight into this culture from an original angle. As U.S.-Japan studies experts Marcia and Jeffrey Johnson state, “Understanding the Japanese people and culture requires understanding the factors that mold them…Given the large amount of time that Japanese students spend in schools, it is little wonder that the education system plays a tremendous role in determining the fabric of Japanese society” (Johnson and Johnson). Furthermore, the investigation of practices at the elementary level demands the most attention because this is where the most basic foundations for later societal operation are being created. In examining the form and structure of Japan’s basic educational process, one may also begin to see a number of ways that it reflects and contrasts with America’s established educational system. By paying attention to the ways in which the two systems differ, one may begin to develop a greater understanding of the unique aspects of each and one can also consider the cultural implications of such differences.

**Establishing a Literary Currency: History of Language in the Secondary Curriculum**

…*language is the archives of history, and, if we must say it, a sort of tomb of the muses. For, though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency, because for the moment, it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer.*

*--“The Poet,” Emerson*

Whenever people come into contact with one another, they have a need and desire to communicate. Language is the facilitator of this social interaction. Without it, large-scale institutions such as government, technological research, and economics would be impossible to establish. Even smaller concerns such as common social interaction and the production of literature would be difficult or non-existent if we lacked the constructions of language. A society lacking language would be a society comprised of individuals forced to rely solely upon themselves for survival; those who could not live by their own skills would die. Every day we take for granted the thousands of possibilities that it presents us. We cannot be faulted for this oversight, as language is such a natural component in our lives that we use it without thinking twice about the process. We speak to a friend on the telephone, we read the newspaper, or we order a hamburger at a restaurant; all of this is done without a second thought to the underlying processes required to formulate the sounds or characters we recognize as spoken or written language. We learn to use it at an early age through mimicking what we hear in our surroundings, and through schooling our ability to express ourselves and interact with each other through the use of language is refined. It is this—the teaching of language in schools—that sparks much heated debate in the realm of education as well as in the home. If language is the ‘currency’ of our culture, then it is not surprising to find so many differing viewpoints on how best to keep a nation and its people ‘wealthy.’ Realizing the emphasis placed on concepts such as the teaching of a Standard English in American schools to better facilitate equal opportunities for students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to develop basic communicative skills and academic proficiency, it follows that such a dynamic construction as language deserves more than simply mechanical attention. Rather, there is motivation for the historical foundation and development of a language to be taught to students while they are simultaneously learning to use it. When a canonized work of literature is taught in school, it is not taught without also recognizing the historical context in which the work was written. Similarly, one does not ignore the history of the United States simply because it is possible to live there while remaining ignorant of its origins; we learn about our nation’s history in school so that we are aware of the people and events that influenced the way we live today. Why should we not also be aware of the historical development of language?

**Of Angels and Elves: Christian and Pre-Christian Influences on *The Lord of the Rings***

Many avid readers of J.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* desire to uncover more information about Middle-Earth and its inhabitants after they have finished the book. Their quest inevitably brings them to the source, to Tolkien and the stories of his life, and those who have done so are aware that he was raised Roman Catholic from a young age and remained so his entire life. The influence that Christianity had upon him and his works, particularly *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, is undeniable. Tolkien mentioned this in a letter to a friend, saying, “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion’, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism” (Letters 172). This is not surprising, knowing that his life was so heavily grounded in Catholicism. But he did not desire to create a Christian allegory for a modern age (in fact he was quite vocal about his disdain for allegory); rather he intended to construct a mythology of England as well as a world for his beloved linguistic creations to thrive in. Just as his languages were influenced by a wide range of older traditions, so was the Middle Earth in which they resided. This anonymously religious world is part of the reason the book is so appealing and accessible to those who read it. In examining the characters and places that make up *The Lord of the Rings*, we can see it as a modern mythology that bears heavy influences of both Christian and pre-Christian ideas while still managing to remain universally applicable to its readers regardless of their religious background.

**The Sound of Silence: Sexism and the English Language**

Language is widely regarded as the primary trait that sets humans apart from other mammals; through its nearly limitless potential we are able to communicate with each other in order to develop the numerous tools and technologies that exist as foundations of our modern society. Language is a lens through which we view and define the multitude of objects and ideas present in our world. People who share a language hold a bond at the most fundamental level; the way in which they view and make sense of their experiences is defined by a common symbolic system. Unfortunately, the same tool that facilitates this advanced communication and creates a distinct cultural identity can also cause unfavorable divisions within the same society. Language is reflective of the culture in which it develops[[1]](#footnote-1) and thus it is prone to many of the same inconsistencies and incongruities that may be present in such a culture. It is indicative not only of what we see in our world, but also how we view it, and thus, as with any representation of experience, language may be biased. Having originated and developed in predominantly patriarchal European and American cultures, the English language has become a subject of criticism as our contemporary consciousness has advanced[[2]](#footnote-2) to confront issues of sexism in our society. Sexist language is defined as “…any language that expresses… [sexually] stereotyped attitudes and expectations, or that assumes the inherent superiority of one sex over the other” (Miller and Swift, 1972, p. 291). Although it is impossible to judge just how significantly our culture and its language has been affected by its androcentrism, one finds it difficult to deny the potential effect of hundreds of years of male dominance in the language of disciplines such as science, medicine, and politics, which play a large social role. Still, if the presence of sexism in our language seems possible, even likely, what evidence exists for this assumption? The most obvious area to examine is that which contains the words themselves: the English vocabulary. By examining the way a language’s vocabulary is structured and how it changes—over time, through usage, and through the influence of dictionaries—one may begin to reveal the truth or falsity of the contention that English is a sexist language.

**What Makes a “Me”? Questions and Criticisms of Personal Identity**

The concept of identity, a relationship that one entity has with itself and that does not admit of degrees, has fascinated and perplexed some of the world’s greatest minds. Renowned philosophers such as David Hume and John Locke have posed responses to the topic, and their ideas have been exposed to harsh criticisms from both their contemporaries and more modern scholars. Personal identity is a topic rife with controversy because it transcends the “ivory tower” of scholarly debate and reaches into our daily lives; the implications of any theory on the subject affect some of the most basic foundations of our society. The judicial branch and systems of law within our government are based upon fundamental principles, one of which is that a person should be held responsible for his or her actions. In order to justify punishment through law, we assume that the person being punished is the same conscious being that perpetrated the crime; what if this was a false assumption? Without knowledge of what makes a person the same in two distinct moments of existence, how could we punish the one for the actions of the other? Furthermore, if a unifying identity was nonexistent, what reason would one have to continue the life that began in a separate identity? Concepts such as friendship or kinship would be absurd; the woman who gave birth to you is no longer the same person, just as you are no longer the same person who was born in that specific moment. Clearly, a life without personal identity would be a chaotic and potentially meaningless existence. Fortunately, this same uncertainty tempered the thoughts of several great philosophers who sought to reconcile this problem, and in so doing, developed the origins of what we now perceive as personal identity.

1. And vice versa, as in the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which will be discussed later. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Even my own language is subject to criticisms of bias, as the use of the verb “advanced” holds a positive connotation and suggests that this change is active and positive—something not everyone is sure to agree with. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)